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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

(for the period from 23 January to 20 July 2001)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1337 (2001) of 30 January 2001, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months, until 31 July 2001. Matters covered in my interim report of 30 April 2001 (S/2001/423) are not repeated here, except as necessary.

II. Situation in the area of operation

2. The situation has been marked by general stability throughout most of the UNIFIL area of operation, with the exception of ongoing tensions and serious breaches of the Blue Line connected to the dispute over the Shab'a farms area (see para. 5 below). Throughout the reporting period, there continued to be numerous minor ground violations of the line, those from the Israeli side largely attributable to construction of a technical fence along the line, and those from the Lebanese side to crossings by shepherds and occasional vehicles.

3. As reported in April, Israeli aircraft violated the line on an almost daily basis, penetrating deep into Lebanese airspace. These incursions, particularly those at low level breaking the sound barrier over populated areas, were especially provocative and caused great anxiety to the civilian population. The air violations are ongoing, despite repeated démarches to the Israeli authorities by myself, other senior United Nations officials and a number of interested Governments. A pledge on 28 June by the Israeli Minister of Defence to my representatives in the region, Terje Roed-Larsen and Staffan de Mistura, to stop at least the flights over cities deep inside Lebanon, has yet to be fulfilled.

4. Demonstrators on the Lebanese side gathered regularly at the points of friction identified in my report of 22 January (S/2001/66), Sheikh Abbad Hill east of Hula and Fatima gate west of Metulla, to throw stones and other objects at Israeli personnel across the line. This activity generally drew smaller crowds and was of a lower intensity than in the previous reporting period. However, there were two incidents in which Israeli soldiers fired their weapons, injuring three demonstrators. On 24 May, in an unrelated incident, a small civilian aircraft, whose pilot had taken off without permission from Beirut airport, was shot down by the Israeli air force after entering Israeli airspace and apparently failing to respond to warnings; the pilot did not survive.

5. In addition to the serious breaches of the Blue Line in the Shab'a farms area on 16 February and 14 April (see S/2001/423, para. 4), there were serious violations of the line during the reporting period. On 29 June, Hizbollah fired four missiles and 14 mortar and smoke rounds at two Israeli positions on the line south-east of Kafr Shuba, wounding two Israeli soldiers, one seriously. The Israel Defence Forces responded with heavy artillery and mortar fire, and eight air-to-ground missiles, towards the Lebanese side of the line in the same vicinity. Two days later, on 1 July, Israel Air Force jets destroyed a Syrian army

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radar position in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, wounding one Lebanese and two Syrian soldiers. An hour after that, Hizbollah responded with 42 mortar rounds at four Israeli Defence Force positions, again in the Shab'a farms area. Israel further responded with some 190 artillery, mortar and tank rounds. The exchange of fire lasted two hours. Tension in the area has remained high following these incidents.

6. Civil administration in the south was somewhat strengthened during the reporting period, with local administration and the central authority in Beirut taking a more active role. Communications, health and welfare systems, as well as postal services, made further slow progress towards integration with the rest of the country. The 1,000-strong contingent of the Lebanese Joint Security Force, comprising army and internal security forces, continued to operate in the areas vacated last year by Israel. This force carries out patrolling and policing of local communities.

7. The Government of Lebanon continued to maintain the position that, so long as there is no comprehensive peace with Israel, the Lebanese armed forces will not be deployed along the Blue Line. Areas along the Blue Line were monitored by Hizbollah through a network of mobile and fixed positions. In some instances, Hizbollah acted as surrogate for the civil administration by extending social, medical and educational services to the local population.

8. On several occasions, Hizbollah personnel restricted the freedom of movement of UNIFIL and interfered with its redeployment. In the most serious manifestation of this interference, Hizbollah first prevented UNIFIL for several weeks from taking up a fixed position south-west of Rmaich, despite the written consent of the Lebanese authorities to the establishment of the UNIFIL position, then put its own position right next to that of UNIFIL. The Hizbollah post was removed from the immediate vicinity of the UNIFIL position only after concerted and prolonged pressure on the Lebanese authorities. In several other cases, Hizbollah erected observation posts adjacent to UNIFIL positions, putting the security of UNIFIL troops at risk.

9. The focus of UNIFIL operations remained on the Blue Line and the adjacent area, where UNIFIL sought to maintain the ceasefire through patrols, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations and preventing escalation.

10. A controversy arose between the Israeli authorities and the United Nations over a UNIFIL videotape, filmed on 8 October 2000, of vehicles that may have been used by Hizbollah in the abduction of three Israeli Defence Force soldiers on 7 October 2000 across the Blue Line (see S/2000/1049, para. 5). Israel and Lebanon have been offered the opportunity to view the tape, with the identities of non-United Nations personnel obscured, on United Nations premises. I have initiated an investigation into the internal handling of the matter.

11. In some villages in the south, tensions developed between local residents and former members of the dismantled South Lebanese Army who had returned home after serving their terms in prison for collaboration with Israel. Isolated incidents of harassment against these returnees were reported, allegedly committed by local residents claiming that the former South Lebanese Army members had been treated too leniently by the military court.

12. UNIFIL continued to assist the civilian population in the form of medical care, water projects, equipment or services for schools and orphanages and supplies of social services to the needy. This assistance was provided from resources made available by troop-contributing countries. The UNIFIL medical centres and mobile teams provided medical care to an average of 4,500 civilian patients per month. A field dental programme treated approximately 600 cases per month. Veterinary assistance has been extended to some villages within the UNIFIL area of operation. UNIFIL cooperated closely on humanitarian matters with the Lebanese authorities, United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations and agencies operating in Lebanon.

13. The clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance in southern Lebanon gained additional momentum. The Government of Lebanon convened an international high-level workshop on mine clearance on 21 and 22 May with the participation of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations and representatives of the donor community. The United Arab Emirates pledge of $50 million for mine clearance in the south was announced. The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations addressed the workshop in his capacity as head of the United Nations Mine Action

Service. A Regional Mine Action Coordination Cell established by the United Nations Mine Action Service in Tyre continued to coordinate United Nations activity in mine-clearing and the United Nations Mine Action Service cooperated closely with the National Demining Office of Lebanon. The United Nations Development Programme continued to lead the efforts of the United Nations system in working with the Lebanese authorities for the development and rehabilitation of the south.

14. A number of civilian casualties of mine incidents were recorded. Since January, two civilians have died and 15 have been injured as a result of exploding mines and ordnance. During the reporting period, UNIFIL demolished more than 1,000 mines and rounds of unexploded ordnance.

III. Organizational matters

15. The reconfiguration and redeployment of UNIFIL proceeded as set out in my interim report. The repatriation of the Nepalese battalion and the Polish Engineering Company are currently under way and will be completed by 31 July 2001. The Nepalese sector has been taken over by the Fijian battalion. The Finnish battalion has been reduced by 107 troops and will repatriate 218 more by 31 July. In its redeployment, UNIFIL is closing a number of rear positions and moving troops into closer proximity to the Blue Line. A map showing the current deployment of UNIFIL is attached.

16. As a result of those changes, with effect from 1 August 2001 the Force will return to a strength of around 4,500 and will be composed of troops from Fiji (593), Finland (310), France (234), Ghana (785), India (792), Ireland (609), Italy (45), Nepal (11 staff officers only), Poland (514) and Ukraine (650). The departure of the Irish and Finnish contingents in the autumn will bring the strength of the Force to about 3,600. UNIFIL was assisted in its tasks by 51 military observers of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization. In addition, UNIFIL employed 371 civilian staff, of whom 127 were recruited internationally and 344 locally.

17. Major General Seth Kofi Obeng concluded his tour of duty as Force Commander on 15 May 2001. Since then Brigadier General Ganesan Athmanathan has been acting as Force Commander. The process of selecting his successor is under way. Staffan de Mistura continued to act as my Personal Representative in Beirut.

18. I regret to report the death of three members of the Force. A Finnish soldier was killed in an accidental fall, a Nepalese soldier died of natural causes and an Indian soldier was accidentally killed during a training exercise. Since the establishment of UNIFIL 238 members of the Force have lost their lives, 78 as a result of firings or bomb explosions, 101 as a result of accidents and 59 from other causes. Firing or mine explosions wounded a total of 344.

IV. Financial matters

19. My second revised budget for UNIFIL for the financial period from 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001 (A/55/482/Add.1) amounts to $207.2 million and reflects reduced requirements arising from the reduction of the Force to 4,500 by 31 July 2001. The General Assembly, in its resolution 55/180 B of 14 June 2001, approved my reduced budget for the period from 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001. In that resolution, the General Assembly also authorized me to enter into initial commitments for UNIFIL in the amount of $106.2 million covering the period from 1 July to 31 December 2001, pending submission of my proposed budget for the Force for the full 2001-2002 period during the main part of the Assembly's fifty-sixth session. The Force's initial resource requirements will be met within the commitment authority of $106.2 million.

20. As at 31 May 2001, unpaid assessments to the Special Account for UNIFIL for the period since its inception to 31 December 2001 amounted to $163.1 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations amounted to $2,320.1 million.

V. Observations

21. The situation along the Blue Line, except in the sector adjacent to the Shab'a farms area, remained generally calm. Most of the violations of the line were minor and quickly corrected once UNIFIL had raised them with the party concerned. The greatest cause of concern remained the attacks across the line in the Shab'a farms area, deliberate acts in direct breach of the decisions of the Security Council. The persistent

Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace have created additional tension.

22. The events that occurred from 29 June to 1 July, described above, indicate the dangers inherent in the situation, which also have the potential to threaten the stability of the region. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that all parties concerned respect the Blue Line as called for by the Security Council, cease all violations thereof and desist from any action that could serve to destabilize the situation.

23. The Government of Lebanon has taken some further limited steps to restore its authority in the former Israeli-controlled area. Although the Lebanese army and internal security forces are present in the area, the Government of Lebanon has continued to let Hizbollah operate close to the Blue Line. More steps should be taken by the Government to ensure the return of effective Lebanese authority throughout the south, including the deployment of its army. A more energetic and concerted effort to restore basic services to the population, and the full return of the local administration, should be integral to this process.

24. It will be recalled that I visited the region in June 2001, when I had discussions on the aforementioned issues with the political leadership in Lebanon and Israel. In meetings with President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon I stressed the need for all parties to respect the Blue Line, and appealed to both sides to keep the situation calm.

25. In a letter dated 9 July 2001 (S/2001/677), the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations conveyed to me his Government's request that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for a further period of six months. In the light of conditions prevailing in the area, I support the extension and recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL until 31 January 2002.

26. In making this recommendation, I must again draw attention to the serious shortfall in the funding of the Force. At present, unpaid assessments amount to $163.1 million. This represents money owed to the Member States contributing the troops that make up the Force. I appeal to all Member States to pay their assessments promptly and in full and to clear all remaining arrears. I should like to express my gratitude to the Governments contributing troops to the Force for their understanding and patience.

27. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the commanders and men and women of UNIFIL for the manner in which they have carried out their task.

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